

**ASSURING FOOD AND NUTRITION SECURITY IN AFRICA BY 2020:  
Prioritizing Action, Strengthening Actors, and Facilitating Partnerships**  
April 1–3, 2004, Kampala, Uganda

**SUMMARY NOTE**

**FIGHTING HIV/AIDS THROUGH ATTITUDINAL CHANGES:  
EXPERIENCES FROM UGANDA**

**Keynote Speaker:** *H.E. Mrs. Janet Museveni*, First Lady of the Republic of Uganda

**Date:** April 3, 2004

Your Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Let me begin by welcoming all of you to Uganda, and hope that you are enjoying your short stay in Kampala.

I was delighted when I received an invitation to participate in this very important conference — important for Uganda and for the whole continent. I wish to thank Dr. von Braun for giving me this precious twenty minutes to share my experience and my thoughts with this body of very distinguished experts in the area of food security in our context here in Africa.

My own thoughts on the subject of food security are, really, from a layperson's view point, and they are garnered from my life as an African woman and also as a person who has worked with grass root women in the rural areas of Uganda now for more than a decade.

But let me first address myself to the specific topic I was requested to talk about, and that is: "Fighting HIV/AIDS Through Attitudinal Changes", and I will share our experience here in Uganda.

The world has been in the struggle against HIV/AIDS now for twenty years. We are told that over 60 million people worldwide are infected with the disease, and millions of them have died. Sub-Saharan Africa has been the worst affected region, with a current total of about 30 million infected people. The over-whelming majority of those infected are in the category of the young and able-bodied who should be producing food, providing labor for industries, manning public institutions such as the civil service, banks, schools and hospitals, and bringing up new generations of Africans.

We have no time, here, to describe the impact of HIV/AIDS on all the nations of Africa. In any case, the numerous demographic, social and economic effects of the epidemic are well documented and well known.

Demographically, here in Uganda, AIDS has erased decades of progress made in population issues. For example, the country's life expectancy fell from 56 years in 1968 to 42 years in 1999.

The impact on the majority of households has been severe. AIDS has caused families to move from relative wealth to absolute poverty. In a developing country such as Uganda, whose economic backbone is agriculture, the effect of AIDS on rural household livelihoods is disastrous. Additional care-related expenses, the reduced ability of caregivers to work, and mounting medical and funeral expenses collectively push the affected households deeper into poverty. Falling food production, loss of family labor, and related factors translate into reduced household food security.

Of course, all the direct and indirect effects of HIV/AIDS translate into the macro-economic impact. By impacting on the labor force, and on households and enterprises, HIV/AIDS has acted as a significant brake on the economic growth and development of Uganda.

Within the larger context, there are sub-groups that require special message and social communication. In some cultures, for example, widows are usually inherited by the male next of kin; a dangerous practice that spreads HIV and wipes out entire families. This is a hard practice to break because it involves the sensitive issues of property and children. In other cultures, circumcision must be carried out in seasonal ceremonial rituals that involve the use of sharp instruments communally utilized; another sure way of transmitting HIV to entire groups of adolescent male members of society.

Attitudes also needed to be changed — and still need to change — regarding the way people treat the infected among them. Initial reactions to victims of AIDS were ruled by misinformation and fear, leading to stigmatization and sometimes condemnation of the infected, and even the affected, by the rest of society.

Messages have addressed the general public and specific messages have been developed for the more vulnerable or high-risk groups within the population. As a result of this intensive and persistent information campaign, general awareness of HIV/AIDS in Uganda is now rated at 99.7%.

But does awareness, or acquisition of mental knowledge, actually translate into behavior change? We believe that, in our case, it has.

Our strategy has been to mount an aggressive education, information and communication campaign, using not only the electronic and print media such as radio, television, billboards and print materials; but also devising other methods which have proved to be more effective in a basically rural and semi-literate population. Starting with the Head of State, whose leadership against this enemy of the people has been resolute, passionate, charismatic and consistent, and who has made it clear that fighting against AIDS is everyone's patriotic duty, the campaign has been characterized by its ability to transform and become "up close and personal" in the different contexts. Each player, at every level, has taken up the information and shaped it into a medium that is appropriate to the cultural context.

While information is guided and monitored, the central coordinating body has allowed different players at all levels to be innovative and imaginative as they bring the reality of the situation to their people.

An example of the success of this strategy is the behavior change that has taken place among the youth.

As a result of special interventions that have been channeled to young people in Uganda, youth between the ages of 14 to 25 years is the group that has contributed most to the country's declining infection trends. Independent studies and surveys by the Ministry of Health have established that the greatest reduction in the number of new infections has been registered in this age group because of behavior change brought by effective social communication.

Studies have shown that adolescents in Uganda are now delaying sexual activity until they are older. Given that about 60% of Uganda's population is less than 20 years old, this change alone prevents thousands of new infections every year. With messages of abstinence, cultures are slowly moving away from early sexual activity.

Traditionally, women are expected to be faithful to their partners in the context of marriage, but men are encouraged to have multiple partners as a sign of wealth and strength. By many accounts, this behavior in men is changing today; this is partly attributed to the message of faithfulness to one sexual partner.

Grass root communication has also brought about empowerment of women, enabling them to be in a position to make informed choices.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, what the example of Uganda has taught us is that it is possible to fight HIV/AIDS through behavior change; basically by presenting information to the people in the way they understand and, as much as possible, face to face with them, at their level. Of course, it takes serious commitment at the highest political level in order to be effective. It also takes involvement

and participation by everybody, in an environment conducive to involvement by civil society. I believe we have now in Uganda as many as 700 civil society organizations dealing with HIV/AIDS, many of them community-based organizations.

Therefore, we can say that the success of Uganda in the struggle against AIDS really belongs to the people. The Head of State sounded the alarm, and everybody rose to the occasion.

As I conclude, I want to submit that what we have managed to do with regard to HIV/AIDS, we can also do in our struggle against poverty and lack of food security. When people are empowered with information and knowledge about how to think and innovate and find solutions from within, they can succeed at whatever goal they set for themselves.

In my work with orphans in the last decade and a half, I have interacted with many women in the poverty-stricken rural areas of Uganda. Many of them head households and care for many children. Through training and a little economic empowerment, these women are being transformed. Through a micro-finance intervention, the women have acquired a culture of saving, and have even been introduced to formal banking operations.

If our governments in Africa could train such women — and they are everywhere in Africa — and make them the extension agents in their own villages, facilitate them with bicycles and gum boots and other necessities, I want to assure you that every farmer in the country would be reached and served faithfully. Train the women, and then men, to help themselves in the areas of food production, food preservation, storage and good nutrition, just as we have trained and entrusted them with the care of HIV victims and orphans.

Let this be the century that ushers in the empowerment of the peoples of Africa, so that they can determine their own destiny and stop being the victims. Africa is the richest continent on Planet Earth. The populations of Africa, empowered with knowledge, are the ones who will find the key to unlock this wealth.

I thank you for listening to me.

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